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DE RUEHLB #0515/01 1061125
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1526
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 1159
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2135
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2408
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000515

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/14/2018
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IS, LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SHIA LEADER CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, ELECTORAL REFORM

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Respected Shia leader Ibrahim Shamseddine rejects Speaker Berri's call for National Dialogue as unconstitutional, and instead calls for cabinet "rehabilitation" to include adding non-Hizballah Shia, followed by an immediate presidential election. Shamseddine, who expressed little interest in joining such a cabinet himself, was working to gain both the Patriarch's and the Shia community's support. In the long-run, however, he believes electoral reform is the only way to solve Lebanon's political quagmire and rid the system of the "dinosaurs" who continue to favor parochial rather than national interests. Shamseddine condemned Hizballah's brainwashing of its constituency through fear, and called on the U.S. to play a constructive role in promoting electoral reform rather than pursuing its current policies in the region, which often caused unintended effects. End summary.

12. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor met with Ibrahim Shamseddine, leader of the Islamic Cultural Center in Beirut, at his office in Shatila in south Beirut on April 10. Shamseddine rejected Speaker Nabih Berri's call for a new National Dialogue, which he deemed extra-constitutional. Instead, this dialogue should take place within constitutional institutions such as parliament, after a new president is elected. "For the past 15 years deals were made among politicians outside the normal constitutional framework, and it is time to stop this habit," he said.

13. (C) Shamseddine cited three major mistakes on the majority's part leading up to the current impasse. The first was extending the term of President Lahoud in 2004. The second was the 2005 quadripartite agreement between Hizballah, Amal, Hariri and Jumblatt, which Shamseddine blamed for the current problems by throwing the Shia community into the hands of Hizballah and Amal. March 14

then committed a further mistake by allowing Berri to be appointed Speaker. Shamseddine described Amal as a non-existing party that melted with Hizballah.

"REHABILITATING" CABINET TO
INCLUDE NON-HIZBALLAH SHIA

¶4. (C) In the absence of a presidential election, however, Shamseddine advocated "rehabilitating" the cabinet by appointing seven new ministers to replace assassinated Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel and the six resigned opposition ministers, five of whom are Shia. The current status quo is not beneficial to the country, he said, warning that "the castle, i.e., the Serail, will be eaten by rats if the cabinet is not expanded."

¶5. (C) Shamseddine said non-Hizballah Shia should be included in the cabinet; the majority had made a fundamental mistake in 2005 by appointing only Hizballah Shia to the cabinet, he said. The new "rehabilitated" cabinet should set a precedent for future governments whereby no one political group would monopolize any confession's seats.

¶6. (C) This "rehabilitation" would then pave the way for parliament to reopen and the presidential election to occur. Shamseddine repeatedly stressed the need to elect the president, who should be an "impartial arbitrator," as soon as possible, and applauded Michel Murr's call for MPs to go and vote. Shamseddine mentioned Nassib Lahoud as a good choice for president.

¶7. (C) Shamseddine did not suggest that he would accept a cabinet position, but did say that he would help prepare the groundwork to gain public acceptance for including non-Hizballah Shia, which he already was doing in his public remarks. "The opposition won't react with arms," he said,

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explaining that Iran did not want armed conflict in Lebanon after years of investment. Hizballah and Amal could "bark, shout, and even show their teeth, but in the end they will do nothing." Furthermore, the opposition was "eroding less slowly" than the majority, he added, so in Iran's eyes all it needed to do was wait.

¶8. (C) Shamseddine said he had met with Patriarch Sfeir recently, noting that he only visits Bkirke when he has an important message to deliver, to advocate "rehabilitating" the cabinet. He conveyed to Sfeir that an expansion of the Siniora cabinet does not replace the need to elect a Maronite President, but that the country cannot sustain the current political impasse. However, the Patriarch feared this would undermine the Maronites' role by prolonging the presidential vacuum, he said.

ELECTORAL REFORM ONLY
WAY TO REMOVE THE DINOSAURS

¶9. (C) In the long-run, however, electoral reform was the only way to remove the "dinosaurs" from Lebanon's political class and bring in a new class of leaders whose focus was on the interests of the state rather than their individual confessional goals, Shamseddine argued. He predicted this would take seven to twelve years (i.e., two presidential terms) before real changes became visible.

¶10. (C) First, however, March 14 leaders needed to be convinced. Hariri made a mistake in including only Sunni on his list in the 2005 parliamentary elections, Shamseddine argued. A further problem was that March 14 no longer represented those who voted for it in 2005. Hariri should set his sights not on not becoming a Sunni leader but a national leader by realizing that even if the new law would cause him to lose some Sunni seats, he could gain seats in

other communities. At the same time, a new law would allow the emergence of new Shia leaders, which would benefit the country as a whole.

¶11. (C) Shemsaddine indicated that although the main pillar of democracy is majority rule, it nevertheless has other components, such as rule of law, good governance, transparency, and civil liberties. Numbers were meaningless in Lebanon's confessional context, he argued, insinuating that although the Shia Lebanon represent the majority of Lebanese, Hizballah and Amal do not understand democracy. He also stressed the importance of the Taif agreement that confirmed the 50-50 balance between Muslims and Christians.

HIZBALLAH BRAINWASHING
ITS CONSTITUENCY

¶12. (C) Shamseddine warned that Hizballah is brainwashing its constituents with a sense of fear and persecution, telling them the majority wants to force them out of their land and villages. Because of this, many Shia fear traveling to other regions in Lebanon that are not controlled by Hizballah. At the time, large amounts of money were pouring into south Beirut, as evidenced by the number of nice cars in the area. "There's no point in showing off a new car here," he said, "because they're everywhere." Shamseddine criticized, however, March 14's use of the term "culture of death" to describe Hizballah, arguing that it angered many Shia to be described this way and was not helpful in terms of March 14's outreach.

¶13. (C) Shamseddine stressed that the main authority for the Lebanese Shia is the state, and not independent militias, and this has been the choice and the history of the Shia in Lebanon. He was critical of the main Shia religious authority, Sayyed Ali Sistani, for not taking strong positions, arguing "what is an 80-year old person afraid of?"

WHILE U.S. IS A CLUMSY GIANT

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¶14. (C) Shamseddine said the U.S. should play the role of a hero and not a giant. A hero, he said, saves people and is more focused, whereas a giant moves causing collateral damage. He added that the U.S. should use its influence to ensure the passage of a fair and equitable electoral law.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Shamseddine, the son of the highly respected late Imam Mohammad Mehdi Shamseddine, is the first to admit that he has the respect in Lebanon's Shia community because of his father. A respected leader in his own right, Shamseddine's name is widely circulated as one of the few independent Shia who would be willing to join the Siniora cabinet, though he himself was careful never to mention this possibility and at one point hinted that he would not accept a seat.

¶16. (C) His idea of a "rehabilitated" government makes sense, and offers a different interpretation of "national unity government" than that offered by the opposition (which is essentially a euphemism for a blocking minority role). However, until Lebanon's feuding politicians learn to think about the big picture and what's good for the country as a whole, we suspect that prospects for even a "rehabilitated" government" including independent Shia, Sunni, and Christians, would fall victim to the perennial haggling over who gets how many and which cabinet positions. End comment.
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